

[The Scottsdale Republic](#)

Health-care reform is the top political issue of the summer. Tempers flared. And lots of people were left wondering what the facts were.

So, to try to get at the truth, we asked readers to send us their questions. We forwarded some to Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz. Here, as Congress prepares to return to work Tuesday, are his answers.

In general, do you favor the Obama health-care proposal and are you going to vote for it?

- *Jack Tracey, Scottsdale*

Both Republicans and Democrats agree that the current health insurance system needs reform. More and more families are losing access to the care they need, and our economy is suffering as businesses try to cope with escalating costs. Individuals with pre-existing illnesses or chronic disease are often denied coverage.

Insurance premiums are rising, due in part to the costs associated with millions of Americans who lack coverage. The average American family is paying an extra \$1,100 in premiums a year to pay for the shifted cost.

The strain is especially severe on small businesses. Since 2000, health-insurance premiums for small businesses have risen 130 percent. This is particularly worrisome in Arizona, because 73 percent of our businesses are small businesses.

I agree with Sen. John McCain when he says that we cannot afford to do nothing. While I

support reform of our health insurance system, current proposals in Congress are still not complete.

How will health care reform get 40 percent of its funding from Medicare without diminishing the quality and availability of care available to seniors?

- *Paula Ricehouse, Scottsdale*

My wife and I are over 65 and covered by Medicare. We do not participate in any health insurance plan offered to members of Congress or federal employees.

I strongly support strengthening Medicare and could not support a plan that would reduce services or diminish quality. I agree with the proposals in Washington that increase the reimbursement rates for physicians so seniors have greater access to the doctors they choose. I also believe that the federal government should be able to negotiate with the pharmaceutical companies for lower drug prices, allowing us to close the Medicare Part D 'donut hole.'

It is important to ensure that our tax dollars are not being wasted. Medicare has an alarming amount of fraud and abuse and we cannot allow these practices, such as paying for procedures that have not been performed, to continue.

Many seniors are on Medicare and have supplemental insurance. How would the proposed health-care reform affect them?

- *from numerous readers*

Our doctors and community hospitals are losing money when treating folks on Medicare and some are not accepting new Medicare patients because of this. I want to make sure that any reform doesn't end up putting any additional strain on Medicare, weakening community hospitals or potentially leaving people with fewer options.

To give you an example, Scottsdale Healthcare lost \$58 million last year because Medicare doesn't reimburse them for what it actually costs to provide care. I cannot support changes to our health insurance system that will worsen the situation.

It is important to remember that there is not a final version of a bill in Congress. Several proposals are still working their way through the process. We are awaiting many details and will not know for certain what is included in the legislation until it is complete.

Why won't Congress pass tort reform (medical malpractice, in particular)? That would save billions of dollars in legal costs and unnecessary tests for the health insurance industry, and its customers (us).

- *John O'Connell, Scottsdale*

I am troubled by the stories of doctors playing defensive medicine by ordering unnecessary tests, which only adds to everyone's costs. At the same time, I also want to ensure that we continue to vigorously protect patient rights. I believe this is an important discussion in which there will be passionate views on all sides.

I agree that there are other areas of our health care system that Congress will ultimately need to consider, and this includes having a rigorous debate on tort reform.

Does this bill include a government-appointed committee or use formulas based on statistics that can deny a patient medical treatment due to age, long-term success with such a treatment, or based on some determination of productive years of life left? Could a patient be denied a hip replacement, for instance, if such a board or formula says it is not worth the expense based on that patient's life expectancy?

- *Michael Frost, Ahwatukee*

Like many Democrats as well as Republicans, I oppose rationing, and oppose a government take over of our nation's health care system.

While there is still not a final version of a bill, no proposal that has received serious consideration in Congress contains "death panels" or committees that will ration care based on age, life expectancy, productivity or any measure.

But please do not just take my word for it. I encourage you to seek non-partisan reviews of proposals in Congress such as ones done by ABC News or factcheck.org. For your convenience you can find sources like these on my website, www.mitchell.house.gov

President Obama has stated that health care reform must reduce the rate of health care inflation, be deficit neutral over 10 years and be deficit reducing over the longer term. Will you vote for a health care reform bill that doesn't do what the president has requested, i.e. be deficit reducing?

- Kevin Condon, Ahwatukee

I strongly believe that we need health insurance reform, and I also strongly believe that it must be deficit neutral.

After reading HR3200, there is no wonder that members of Congress do not want to participate in the new system, rather electing to retain your present health insurance plan. If this plan is good enough for America, why is it not good enough for Congress?

- John & Rita Elef, Mesa

While, as a matter of principle, I do not personally receive my health insurance through the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, I do not believe members of Congress should have any better or worse health insurance than anyone else. If anything, we should be working to make the kind of coverage that members of Congress and federal employees receive available to more Americans.

Currently, federal employees, including members of Congress, participate in an insurance exchange through which they receive the choice of several private health plans, with literally hundreds of options.

Many Republicans and Democrats in Congress, including me, support the concept of a broader insurance exchange in which individuals and small businesses, many of whom cannot currently afford coverage, could pool their purchasing power and comparison shop for competitive rates that best meet their needs.

For the first time private insurance companies would compete against each other in a way they've never done before. In addition, the pool would be spread across a wider scale, which would require insurers to compete for your business.

Where we will get the additional doctors needed to cover 50 million people who currently do not have insurance?

- *from several readers*

Although millions of Americans don't have health insurance, it doesn't mean they don't get sick and don't ultimately get treated.

Those without insurance are often forced to wait until potentially preventable conditions reach a crisis point, when they receive care at the most expensive point in our health care system. The costs associated with this type of care end up hurting families - even those with insurance.

When the uninsured end up in emergency rooms, hospitals are forced to charge more to those of us who have insurance to help pay for it. On average, those of us with insurance pay \$1,100 a year in higher insurance premiums to help pay for the uninsured.

Access to primary care physicians before their condition reaches a crisis point not only cuts down on costs, but it keeps patients healthier. I believe that we need to expand family practice medicine and do more to encourage people to become primary care physicians. I support expanding family practice residency programs, increasing the Medicare reimbursement rates, and expanding loan forgiveness for those that choose to go into family practice.